



## Branchville, South Carolina, History

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## Branchville, as it Was and as it Is

The following historical sketch of our thriving little sister town, Branchville, was prepared and read at the laying of the corner stone of the Methodist Church at that place by Rev. Dr. Thomas Raysor. He said: Seventy years ago the place where Branchville now stands – pulsating with life and trade – was a dismal swamp, known by the not very euphaneous name of “Matchet’s Pond.” Through what is now Main street, flowed the waters of this pond to “pen branch,” and on to the Edisto, made famous in history by Carolina’s distinguished son, William Gilmore Simms, Esq., who lived ten miles above here near Midway on the Charleston road. The people at this period were hardy and self-reliant. Their wants were few and simple. They lived mainly in pole houses, covered with clab-boards, and exercised a great deal in the open air. To walk three or four miles to church, or indeed to any gathering, and *toat* the baby, with the crop-eared, stump-tail dog behind, was considered no big job. It was of common occurrence. A large portion of the time was spent in fishing and hunting, attending corn-shuckings and quiltings, wrestling, jumping, shooting and “wearing the thimble,” what ever that was. These were days of peace and plenty – mince pies, floating islands, sick headaches, heart disease and dispepsia were unknown. It is said the first deer that F. W. Fairey killed was routed where now stands the store of A. F. H. Dukes, a prominent and successful merchant of the place. After running through aligator hole where lives the quiet and modest Dr. Grisset, he ran out by the squire, near where his mill pond now stands, and was shot down. The squire has always lived near Branchville, and his name is closely associated with the history of the place. He has gathered considerable wealth, and is to-day still energetic and enterprising. James Benton Berry, Esq.,<sup>1</sup> another veteran, still lives under the shadow of the town, of which he has owned a considerable portion. He enjoys a green old age, and furnishes the data that rescues Branchville from oblivion. To-day he is seeing the beginning of what had been the dream and ambition of his life; to wit: A Methodist church on one of his lots in the town of Branchville. Edward Myers, a quiet and peaceable citizen was the professional hunter and angler of the place. The first house built in Branchville was a double log pen, built by James Cooner for the railroad company. This was about the year 1830. The railroad track was laid at this place about 1831 by Mr. George Walker and Col. Thompson, gentlemen from Colleton County, who had the contract for building the road from Fifty-eight to the Edisto river. The first train of cars ran to this place in November, 1832. Tradition has it that

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<sup>1</sup> This should be James Brewton Berry, Esq.

when the first train arrived, a large number of persons, white and colored, were present to see the great sight. When it approached, like a thing of life, squirting water and belching forth volumes of black smoke, the men turned pale and the women screamed. An old woman is said to have exclaimed at the top of her voice, "It is the devil – see the fire and brimstone." Amid the greatest consternation she left, and when she reached her home fell exhausted at the gate. On this train came an enterprising Frenchman whose name was Philip Shartrand<sup>2</sup> and his body servant, Fortune. He arranged with the company to open a hotel in the double pen house, where he did business until he built a larger and better house on the South side of the road for hotel and store purposes for himself. Here he did business until he built the brick house which now stands between the Columbia and Augusta tracks, and having recently been thoroughly renovated is an ornament to the place. The name of Shartrand is synonymous with Branchville, indeed he gave it this name, the first being Good Stone. Mr. Shartrand, after accumulating considerable wealth, died here in 1858. The first store house was put up by Mr. Wm. Fairey, the father of W. F. and J. D. D. Fairey, on the lot where now stands the store and dwelling of J. D. D. Fairey. This store was rented and opened by an Irishman from Charleston, whose name was McMaster. About this period Mr. James Grimes says, whiskey was in great abundance, and was sold by the drink at 6 1/4 cents. Drunkenness, horse-racing, and gambling were frequent occurrences. It was the custom about his time when a man married to have venson at the supper or dinner. He was considered an "unlucky dog" who came to his marriage feast without having venson to eat. When this occurred the men would make witty remarks and the old women, adjusting their spectacles, would say, "Poor Sal; she is given to have a hard road to travel." Mr. James Grimes says he had the honor of killing the buck that graced the marriage table of James Benton Berry, Esq. In the year 1750 there came a large colony from Mecklenburg, Germany, and settled in New York. With this colony came the Ott family. A part of the family came to South Carolina, and some of them settled near Branchville, and the name has gone into history in connection with the place. Col. Ott, the father of the Doctor who was prominent in Branchville affairs at this time, was a man of commanding presence, remarkable for firm sense and business sagacity. Previous to the year 1811 – how long before we do not know – the Methodists worshipped in a little pole house, one and a half miles northwest of Branchville. Of its history but little is known. It was built by N. Byrd the parent stock of a large and respectable number of that name in and around the place. Division was caused in this church by one William Hoard organizing a singing school in the church. The result of this division was that on the 30<sup>th</sup> day of January, 1811, a lot was bought from George Hartsog for \$1, where now stands Sardis Church, one mile north-east from Branchville. The first church was a small frame building, which gave place in 1872 to a larger and more sightly one. The trustees of the first church were Rev. Jacob Barr, John Rhoad, Jessie Fairey, Robert McAlhaney, John Felder, Joseph Hare and John Thompson. Of these, not one is living. In 1825 the first Sunday School was organized in Sardis Church by Jacob Pooser. He continued at the head of this school until 1850, when J. B. Berry became the superintendent; in 1874 it passed into the hands of B. P. Izlar, then J. W. Fairey, now E. E. Bruce. In 1825, says Mr. James Grimes, the Baptists built a church two and a half miles from Branchville, near where Mrs. Ann Dukes now lives. This church was called Orange. Thomas Adams was said to be its first pastor. The church was built and organized in the town in 1858. Rev. R. J. Edwards was its first pastor. Branchville had but little trade, small population and a rather dwarfed existence until

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<sup>2</sup> This name should be spelled Philip Chartrand.

the close of the late civil war. Several causes conspired to this: First, the railroad owning the land near the track would not sell lots for building purposes, and second, the place being low and swampy it was thought it would be sickly. Since the war the lots have been sold, the place has been very thoroughly drained and Branchville has gone up, as if touched by a "magician's wand." A lady very much interested in the place said to the writer, not many years ago, that now the place was very healthy, though the people were inclined to be sick. To-day Branchville has 17 stores, 1 hotel, 2 boarding houses, 1 carriage shop, a town hall and a guard house. The trade is good and the population about 700. Dr. Ott, born and brought up near the place, and whose name is closely associated with it, is the leading physician. He moves about among us with his flowing white beard, having the confidence and esteem of the community. The prominent merchants are A. F. H. Dukes, J. D. Rhoad, Burns Myers, F. A. Bruce, D. D. Myers, J. Louis Berry, &c. The pastors of the churches are Rev. Thos. Raysor, Methodist, and Rev. Arthur Buist, Baptist. The depot and telegraph office is under the direction of Mr. J. R. Ligon, a model officer. The express office is in charge of Mr. James Grimes, a man remarkable for honesty and integrity. W. H. Reedish, Esq., a capable, accommodating and popular officer presides over the mail bags. Within the corporation is a steam saw mill, also a grist mill and gin run by steam, owned and worked by Messrs. Smoak & Byrd, two energetic and enterprising men. The wheelwright business is under the direction of S. S. Walters, a capable workman. W. B. Reeves, a true son of Crispen, works efficiently in leather. While Dr. R. Crum, our resident dentist, makes a comfortable living picking his neighbors's teeth. To-day, Sept. 8, 1880, we stand here in the presence of a large audience to lay the corner stone of the Methodist Church – whose light meeting and blending with the light that shines from the Baptist Church on the opposite hill – will under God we trust be the conservative influence and element that is to keep Branchville from the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Here we pause. What will be the record of seventy years to come?